

Parliamentary Reform in Britain

Aufgaben

- 1 Summarize the text. (Material)
(30 BE)

- 2 Explain the process of parliamentary reform in Britain during the 19th century, considering the text by Lord Russell.
(35 BE)

- 3 Lord Russell predicted that a reformed parliamentary Britain “can fairly call on the people to support the future burdens of the country and to struggle with the future difficulties which it may have to encounter.” (Material)
Discuss to what extent this prediction came true in the inter-war period of the 20th century.
(35 BE)

Material**Lord John Russell: Speech introducing the Reform Bill (1831)**

Lord Russell (1792–1878) was a Member of Parliament for the Whig Party (which later in the 19th century became the Liberal Party) and served twice as Prime Minister. In the name of the government he brought forward the Reform Bill in the House of Commons on 1 March, 1831, which was enacted as the (Great) Reform Act in 1832.

No man of common sense pretends that this assembly¹ now represents the commonalty² or people of England. [...]

Allow me to imagine, for a moment, a stranger from a distant country, who should arrive in England to examine our institutions. [...] He would have been told that the proudest boast of this celebrated
5 country was its political freedom. If, in addition to this, he had heard that once in six years this country, so wise, so renowned, so free, chose its representatives to sit in the great council where all the ministerial affairs were discussed and determined, he would not be a little curious to see the process by which so important and solemn an operation was effected. What then would be his surprise if he were taken by his guide, whom he had asked to conduct him to one of the places of election, to a green
10 mound³ and told that this green mound sent two members to parliament, or to be taken to a stone wall with three niches in it and told that these three niches sent two members to parliament; or, if he were shown a green park with many signs of flourishing vegetable life, but none of human habitation, and told that this green park sent two members to parliament! But his surprise would increase to astonishment if he were carried into the north of England, where he would see large flourishing towns,
15 full of trade and activity, containing vast magazines of wealth and manufactures, and were told that these places had no representatives in the assembly which was said to represent the people. Suppose him, after all, for I will not disguise any part of the case – suppose him to ask for a specimen⁴ of popular election, and to be carried for that purpose to Liverpool; his surprise would be turned into disgust at the gross venality⁵ and corruption which he would find to pervade⁶ the electors. After seeing
20 all this, would he not wonder that a nation which had made such progress in every kind of knowledge, and which valued itself for its freedom, should permit so absurd and defective a system of representation any longer to prevail? [...]

Our opponents say our ancestors gave Old Sarum⁷ representatives; therefore we should give Old Sarum representatives. We say our ancestors gave Old Sarum representatives because it *was* a large
25 town; therefore we give representatives to Manchester, which *is* a large town. [...]

To establish the constitution on a firm basis, you must show that you are determined not to be the representatives of a small class or of a particular interest, but to form a body who, representing the people, springing from the people, and sympathizing with the people, can fairly call on the people to support the future burdens of the country and to struggle with the future difficulties which it may have
30 to encounter.

Debates on the Reform Bill (1831), in: Carl Stephenson / Frederick George Marcham (Hg.): Sources of English Constitutional History. Bd. 2: A Selection of Documents from the Interregnum to the Present. New York u. a. 1972, S. 755–758.

¹ The author refers to the House of Commons.

² commonality – Volk, Bevölkerung

³ mound – kleiner Hügel

⁴ specimen of popular election – ein Exemplar bzw. Beispiel für eine Volkswahl

⁵ venality – Bestechlichkeit

⁶ to pervade – durchziehen, erfüllen

⁷ In 1831, Old Sarum (Wiltshire) had eleven voters who sent two Members of Parliament to London.